No. 40. Sin the cause of Afflictions.

Pſalm 85th, 8th Verſe.

I will hear what God the Lord will ſpeak; for He will ſpeak to His people and His ſaints: But let them not turn again to folly.

Whether this Pſalm was compoſed when David was forced from Jeruſalem by his rebellious son Abſalom (2 Sam. 15th); whether when Sennacherib king of Aſsyria was driven by a miraculous Providence out of the land of Iſrael (2 Kings, 19th); or whether in the times of Ezra and Nehemiah after the deliverance from the Babyloniſh Captivity (Neh. 4th) it is not material to enquire. When any of the ſons of men labor under any affliction, and feel the hand of God heavy upon them, they may pour out their ſouls in this pious effuſion of the Pſalmiſt, unto Him who doth not willingly afflict nor grieve the children of men. With the Pſalmiſt we may all addreſs ourſelves to God—"turn us, O God our Saviour, "and let thine anger ceaſe from us. Wilt thou not

" turn again and quicken us, that we may rejoice in
" Thee? Shew us thy mercy, O Lord, and grant us
" thy salvation. I will hear what God the Lord," &c.

The first thing implied in the word hearken, or rather, which is presupposed, is Prayer. Tho' God could bestow His blessings unasked for, the Psalmist knew He did not ordinarily do so, especially such a blessing as that of Peace; and therefore in the verse before the Text, he prays that " God would vouchsafe to
" shew him His mercy and grant him His sal-
" vation."

Prayer is a duty to God which He requires of all persons, and in all states and conditions of life, but it is a duty to which we are best disposed by afflictions. 'Tis a homage by which we especially acknowledge His Godhead; and 'tis the ordinary means which God has ordained for our obtaining His mercies; nay, the very condition on which He grants them. God himself commands us to pray to Him when we are afflicted " call upon me in the day of trouble, and," he im-

mediately annexes the reward, "I will deliver thee." Our Bleſsed Saviour, when He was about "to taſte "death for every man," prayed in His agony, with ſtrong crying and tears, that "the bitter cup might "paſs from Him," but withal ſubmitted Himſelf entirely to God's diſpoſal, saying, "Father, if it be "poſsible let this cup paſs from me; nevertheleſs, not "as I will, but as Thou wilt." Indeed "no chaſ= "tening for the preſent ſeemeth to be joyous but "grievous," nor does God expect or even intend we ſhould be inſenſible under it. David might complain that "God had vexed him with all His ſtorms;" and Job lament that "God's hand was heavy upon Him." Our ſenſe of the puniſhment will ſoon force us to say "it is enough," and to beſeech God to take away His correcting hand before we are truly and ſufficiently humbled by it.

Let us pay no regard to the ſuggeſtion that we ſerve a hard maſter, that others are puniſhed leſs tho' they deſerve no better than we do, that God has quite

caſt us off in His diſpleaſure, that He hideth away His face from our calamity and patience under it. Far be it from us to liſten to such ſuggeſtions! We know that God is not only a juſt, but a gracious God. He puniſhes us for our good: He does behold us and our afflictions—"we have seen the end of the Lord, "that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercies." We are to conſider that our Calamities come from the hand of God, and say with the Prophet, "shall there "be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?" This ſhould silence all repining. And indeed it has proved a sovereign remedy againſt murmuring. The Pſalmiſt "became dumb and opened not his mouth, "because the Lord did it."

We may reflect that God may juſtly afflict us becauſe we have provoked Him to it; our sins have deſerved puniſhment, and therefore our affliction is from ourſelves. This makes the Prophet's queſtion very pertinent—"wherefore doth a living man complain?— "a man for the puniſhment of his ſins." We, alas!

and our fathers, have sinned, and by our sins death and misery entered into the world; "and so death "passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." Since sin is so universal and malignant as to render all men obnoxious to punishment, God does not transgress the rules of His justice in afflicting us; and if so, we have no reason to murmur at His Providence. God proceeds against us only according to that law "which is holy, and just, and good. And shall not "the Judge of all the earth do right?" Let us say then, with the Prophet, "I will bear the indignation "of the Lord, because I have sinned against Him."

I now proceed to shew that God will in his good time deliver us, if we patiently submit to His dispensations—for He will speak peace to His people.

The assurance that God will speak peace to us, implies that He sees afflictions convenient for us, and that the continuance of them will prepare us for greater degrees of glory. With such assurance we shall not doubt of the promises made by the Almighty of relief.

We shall have no distrust of either His willingness to relieve us because He has afflicted us, or His ability to do it because He does not send us immediate deliverance. No. He is willing to succour us, because it is a necessary effect of His infinite goodness. He created us with a design that we should be happy both here and hereafter, and when, by the suggestions of the Devil, we had forfeited that happiness and involved ourselves in misery, God's wisdom and goodness soon contrived our recovery by the death of His Son. Mercy is an Attribute in which God is said to delight. When He renewed the two tables of the Law and proclaimed His Attributes himself, He is very particular in reckoning up several branches of His mercy (Exod. 34th, 6th & 7th) and places it before His justice. He is said by the Prophet Jeremiah—"not to afflict "willingly, nor grieve the children of men." And when He represents his sending judgments upon men, to shew His great unwillingness to do it, and that He does it as seldom as is consistent with His jus-

tice, He calls it "doing His strange work, and "bringing to pass His strange act." How affectionately did Christ weep at the foresight of those judgments, and that destruction that was to come upon Jerusalem? How often did God by His Prophets entreat the Israelites to amend their lives, on purpose that he might remove His judgments and have mercy upon them? Is not this sufficient to obviate all our doubts of God's willingness to help us in the needful time of trouble, and to make us safely trust, with the Psalmist, "that as the heaven is high above the earth, "so great is God's mercy towards them that fear "Him?"

Let us now see the danger of turning again to folly after deliverance from afflictions.

As we demean ourselves well or ill, perform, neglect, or disobey those commands God has laid upon us, depends the favour of God for the future, or our incurring again His most heavy displeasure. The one way we make our very calamities a furtherance of

our salvation—the other, we turn that deliverance God intended, and by wise men would have been made use of, as a blessing, into a curse—by making even God's mercy a means of drawing us back to perdition, and of aggravating our offences. Our enemy is no less busy in tempting us to provoke God in prosperity than he is in adversity, none being more ready to consent than those who live in ease and plenty. For when once God's correcting hand is taken away from us—our wounds and bruises closed up and healed, and our heaviness turned into joy, we are too apt to forget the good rules we had learned in the school of affliction—to launch out much deeper into pleasure than we had before been in pain, to take all the quiet and good we enjoy as the reward of our own merits, without looking up to the hand from whence they came, or considering our unworthiness to receive them. But after God has spoken peace to his people—after He has given them a happy issue out of their afflictions, let them not turn again to folly.

By folly is meant sin. The sin of Sechem with Jacob's daughter is called by this name—"her "brethren were very wroth with him because he had "wrought folly in Israel." David, when he had numbered the people, because of his confidence in human strength, in the confession of his sin to God and prayer for forgiveness, cries out, "I have done very foolishly." Now tho' this may seem so soft a name for sin to some as to make them venture more freely to commit it, from the persuasion that it is not so provoking to God as they are taught to believe it, yet this name of folly may contain more than such men are aware of. The Spirit of God might have expressed it in terms that sound harsher to us, and have loaded it with the names of unrighteousness, wickedness, or impiety. But by this expression of folly He speaks to us in a way more likely to work upon us, and raise in us an aversion to it. Like a tender father, God does not mention the affront and injury done to Himself by sin, but speaks of it only as it is hurtful to us—that

if we made no conscience of offending Him, yet we should consider the evil or punishment we draw upon ourselves. Like a Creator to creatures endowed with reason which He had given them to be a light and guide of their actions, He applies to their understandings, and bids them—since neither their love can be excited to keep them from violating his honor, nor their fear from bringing mischief upon themselves—to consider a little before they debased their rational nature.

The soul of man is naturally desirous of that which is good: all its aims are directed, all its schemes are laid to bring about that end; and there is scarce any one in his right senses that desires or commits evil, merely because it is evil, but because it comes under the notion of something that is good. And some sins there are which men are made to believe to be innocent or of an indifferent nature, having no mixture in them either of good or evil. God is an utter enemy to all sin, there being nothing

more contrary to His nature; and many and terrible are the threatenings He has denounced againſt all the workers of iniquity. "Whoſoever abideth in "Him," says St. John, "ſinneth not; whoſoever "ſinneth hath not ſeen Him, neither known Him." And again he adds, "whoſoever is born of God doth "not commit ſin; for His ſeed remaineth in him, "and he cannot ſin, becauſe he is born of God"—he that does honeſtly and ſincerely endeavor to live up to God's laws, and for the moſt part does his utmoſt to eſchew that which is evil, tho' he ſhould ſometimes "be overtaken in a fault," yet he ſhall not be ſo ſubdued by ſin as finally to periſh; he is no habitual or groſs ſinner, but the general tenor and diſpoſition of his mind is good; he will "be quickened by the Spi"rit, who will renew him again to repentance." Surely then it muſt be folly even to madneſs to turn away by ſin from our chiefeſt good, and make our only friend become our enemy.

Conſider further, that by turning again to folly

the hazard the soul runs both of forfeiting the greatest happiness, and of involving itself in the greatest misery. As the soul is the image of God, it partakes somewhat of God's spiritual nature, and is of an immortal duration, that is, it shall never die. This subjects it, as men obey or disobey, to eternal happiness or endless miseries. It must therefore be very great folly to forfeit everlasting bliss, or undergo torments without end by offending Almighty God. Hence the folly of sin evidently appears. On the contrary, obedience to God's commands is called wisdom—"behold the "fear of the Lord that is wisdom, and to depart from "evil is understanding." It is to be truly wise for ourselves, and that in a matter of the greatest concern, and to all eternity.

And if sin at the first commission of it be termed folly, what must it be to return to it after we have felt the wrath of God for its commission, and been delivered from our sufferings? This must make our folly exceeding foolish. What says the Almighty upon

this subject? "If you will not hearken unto me, nor "do all these commandments, I will appoint over "you terror, consumption, and the burning ague, "that shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart, "and you shall sow your seed in vain, for your "enemies shall eat it. And I will set my face "against you, and you shall be slain before your "enemies, they that hate you shall reign over you, "and ye shall flee when none pursueth." If by such judgments they are not reclaimed, He adds, "I will punish you seven times more for your sins." This is God's dealing with us; and it is the way we deal with one another: slighter correction is usually given at first; and then, if that will not produce reformation, the punishment grows more severe in proportion to the offender's becoming more hardened. But then "of how much sorer punishment," suppose you, "shall he be thought worthy," who does not make a right use of God's mercy? What shall we deserve, if, after God has delivered us out of trouble, we return to

our former sinful courses? This is to despise the mercy and goodness of God, "to return Him evil for good, "and hatred for His good-will."

Should a person in extreme affliction be told that he would abuse and affront his deliverer and take part with his enemies, he would answer as Hazael did Elisha, "am I dog that I should do this great thing?" To sin against the mercies of our deliverer; to take pleasure in provoking Him who took pity on us in our misery, and spoke peace and comfort to our afflicted hearts, is to retort His favours with the basest indignities. But surely God will heavily avenge the abuse of His mercy. The words of the text, but let them not turn again to folly, carry along with them a tacit threatening of more severe judgements, if we presume so far upon God's mercy as to return to our sins. When the impotent man was healed by our Saviour of his infirmity, Christ forewarns him to be more circumspect for the future "sin no more lest a worse thing happen unto thee"—

God has more and greater judgments in store for thee, if thou wilt not be reclaimed by this remarkable instance of His abundant mercy.

May we, my Brethren, render unto God praise and thanksgiving! May we praise the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! In the day of trouble we will call upon Him, for our help standeth in the name of the Lord. We are sensible that sin is the cause of all our afflictions. We know that we are punished only because we have done iniquity. We will therefore offend no more. We will beseech the Almighty that, when we are assaulted by temptations, He will enable us by His Grace to set Him always before us that we may not fall. We will beseech the Almighty that, however violently we may be assaulted, we may be more than conquerors. We will hearken what God the Lord will speak, knowing that He will speak peace and comfort to those who trust in Him, and we will be careful not to turn again to

folly, lest He plague us seven times more for our sins.

Entered at Stationers' Hall.

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